

Good Readers Make Good Historians: “Can we just settle it on ‘a lot of people died’?”

Scott T. Barksdale

North Yarmouth Memorial School, Maine School Administrative District #51

WHILE IT MIGHT sometimes make us feel good to think otherwise, it is not so much what *we do* as teachers that helps our students learn as it is what *we have them do*.¹ History teachers often ask their students to read something—an article, a textbook chapter, a primary source. If students “don’t get” what we want them to learn from a text, we might throw our proverbial hands up in the air and lament that they are not very good readers. If we have seen this one too many times in our years as teachers, we might even be tempted to become dramatic and conclude that such lousy readers will surely make lousy historians. But if it is true that students learn best through what we ask them to do, then perhaps this lack of learning means we are asking them to do the wrong thing. Perhaps just asking them to “read it” is not enough.

I. Introduction: Learn to Read—Read to Learn

There is a popular saying in elementary education that in grades K-3, students “learn to read,” and then in grades 4 and beyond, they “read to learn.” This suggests that after the age of about 9, there are not many new things to teach students about reading. As texts become more complex, the thinking seems to go, students just need to try harder with the reading skills they already have.

While this may be true for reading things like menus or directions, it leaves students at a loss when it comes to developing their historical thinking and understanding. Unfortunately, history seems to be thought of simply as a subject filled with content (similar to menus and directions)—it is even lumped into the category of “content areas,” along with science and mathematics. But science and math have somehow maintained their status as things that are done: you *do* a science experiment, you *do* a math problem. History has the static feel of a noun, able only to accumulate. While everyone knows that science has its method and math has its proofs, the fact that history has a process somehow escapes many teachers and, by association, their students.

So, if we are to recast the “read to learn” part of education (elementary through graduate school) as something that requires more than a 3rd grade set of reading skills, *what else is there that we could have students do?* In other words, beyond teaching and reteaching familiar comprehension strategies, what are some practices and routines that we can establish in our classrooms to make the reading tasks we ask students to do into “not merely a way to learn new information but . . . a way to engage in new kinds of thinking”?²² In this paper, I attempt to describe one way teachers can have students of all ages engage in this kind of reading work to develop their historical thinking and understanding.

II. History, Reading, and Teaching

Instead of simply gathering up the content of stories and facts, Keith C. Barton suggests that, fundamentally, “Historians ask questions about the past, and they seek evidence that will help answer those questions.”²³ While it might be easier to focus on the nouns “evidence” and “questions” in Barton’s words, perhaps focusing on the verbs “ask” and “seek” would be more productive, since students learn best by doing. *Asking* questions and *seeking* evidence sound like reasonable things to have students do. They already do them as proficient readers when they question the meaning of an unfamiliar word and then seek evidence of its meaning by reading forward or back in the text. Or, perhaps they use some familiar pieces of the word—its affixes and roots—to find evidence of its meaning. In the language of reading comprehension theory, students may use a text’s pragmatics (how context contributes to meaning) to understand the word’s semantics (the meaning of a particular word). Or, students may use the word’s morphology (the smallest meaningful chunks in a word) to understand its semantics. In both cases, proficient readers know how to seek out answers to the questions they have asked. They are able to zoom in on the smallest meaningful pieces of written

language and to zoom out to a broader meaningful context in order to make sense out of a text.

This practice of zooming in and zooming out to make meaning is also something historians do when they seek evidence to answer the questions they have asked. When they are sourcing, corroborating, and contextualizing, they are zooming out from a text (albeit with a wider lens than the reader might tend to use) to the different milieus and artifacts that make up its context. When they are doing a close reading of a text, they are zooming in, noticing its pieces and how they fit together. These are parallel actions of the historian and of the proficient reader, and they can be brought into close relation by teaching methods that recognize and encourage them during the reading of historical texts—teaching that asks students to do specific tasks (asking and seeking, among others) that themselves become the ground rules, boundaries, and supports that help students engage in historical thinking.

But here is the rub with this grand idea: if our proficient readers do not realize that they do not understand a word or phrase or paragraph or entire historical text, then they cannot ask a question about its meaning and so have no need to seek out any evidence. Their work as historians is over before it has begun. Without becoming somehow unsettled or puzzled or otherwise itchy from a text, a student does not begin to seek. More to the task of teaching: if teachers do not put their students into situations where they are confronted by limits in their understanding, they have failed to put them into a place where they can find their own questions or, it has been said, where the questions can find them.⁴

So, how do history teachers do this? What can they have their students do as readers that will help them learn about history and the process of studying it? The literature is full of suggestions of *what* to teach, but scholars seem to become tight lipped around the question of *how* to teach it. Even attempts to address this question directly tend to stray into the area of curriculum rather than pedagogy. For example, while Jeffery Nokes provides a list of “Possible Instructional Interventions” to overcome the “Barriers to Historical Reading,” nearly half of these are curricular instead of instructional (“Include Controversies” or “Provide Primary Sources”).⁵ Also, with his many good suggestions that deal with instruction, such as “Immerse students in illustrative case studies” and “Encourage students to conduct authentic historical inquiries,” it is not clear what, exactly, teachers might ask students to do in order to accomplish these as readers of historical texts. In a similar article, three out of five of Musbach’s recommendations for how to teach with primary sources are about the sources themselves or background information rather than about what teachers can have students do with the sources.⁶ In addition, outside of the literature, it seems hard to find a public school administrator who does not have “reading in the

content areas” on his or her agenda. This usually refers, however, to a set of strategies for reading textbooks (or “textbook” texts), and so does not directly address the domain-specific ways of thinking that history students need to be taught. These thin pickings leave a classroom teacher hungry.

One area in which to find some instructional sustenance is inferential thinking, which blankets both reading and the doing of history. Good readers and good historians know how to fit something new—something unknown—into what they already know and understand. When making inferences, they develop “conclusion[s]...on the basis of evidence and reasoning.”⁷ But while inference-making has been widely recognized as a key skill for reading comprehension,⁸ it is at odds with the content-area idea of history as little more than a progression of dates and facts, or, as it has been put so well, as “just one damn thing after another.”⁹

The request in this paper’s title—to just “settle it on ‘a lot of people died’”—came from a student named Brent¹⁰ during a thirty-minute social studies class, where he and nineteen other 4th graders were doing a close reading of a journal entry from “Observations by Master George Percy, 1607” (see Appendix).¹¹ In this class, good (and improving) readers were simultaneously doing the work of good historians. By making inferences from the details they read in a primary source text, they were also thinking historically, which “requires more than mastery of facts; it demands a detailed, densely textured analysis of the relations among those facts.”¹²

These students were studying the early European (mostly English¹³) colonization of North America, and they had already studied primary and secondary sources about the Popham Colony.¹⁴ They would go on to study more primary and secondary sources about Jamestown and Plymouth. Studying Jamestown is a curricular requirement in this school district, and I selected this particular journal excerpt because it would provide students with an opportunity to think about some factors that affected the survival of a colony (“Reasons why settlements succeed and fail” and “Benefits of the location of settlements” are how these are described in the district’s curriculum). Through studying the selected primary and secondary sources, most students were getting their first glimpses at the context of this time.

In this journal entry, Master George Percy listed the colonists who had died over a three-week period in the newly established Jamestown. Just before Brent’s plea, students were trying to figure out exactly how many people had died. They spoke their thoughts: Irene stated, “there’s Thomas Stoodie, and then it says ‘Cape Merchant’ and...I don’t think ‘merchant’ is another person.” Maggie insisted, “it says two things about Captaine Gosnold’s death...it’s not two people!” Brent said, “I got sixteen and if Cape Merchant isn’t one, then I have fifteen.” Was it fifteen people, sixteen people, twenty-two people?

In response to this rereading, refiguring, and discussing, Brent seemed to sense some comfort and clarity in folding the document's complexity into his idea that "a lot of people died" during the founding of Jamestown. It is a simple yet profound idea, one that can be accurately generalized to other colonization narratives, and he developed it by using inferences to make sense of the textual details in this primary source and by listening to his classmates do the same. Importantly, his idea did not result from what a teacher told these students about this text: it resulted from *their* reading and *their* thinking and *their* talking about it with each other and with me (their teacher). While I had carefully guided the process of studying this text, it was the students who decided which inference-filled paths to take through it and, ultimately, what historical conclusions it could support.

Brent's comment exemplifies a goal of both the teaching of reading comprehension and historical understanding, as well as of the teaching method used here, called "critical exploration in the classroom"¹⁵—that students develop their ideas about a text by making sense of its details and context. It is my contention that students can develop a sense of the "relations among...facts" in their historical understanding in much the same way as they develop a sense of the "relations among" words and sentences in their reading comprehension. In other words, students can apply the reading skills that support inference-making in order to develop their historical understanding. The following sections provide a snapshot of a teacher (the author) engaging his students in this practice while reading a primary source text, an application of a theoretical model to identify and understand the learning that students are doing, and some practical ideas to help teachers think about what they can ask students to do as good readers that will help them become good historians (found in the "In Practice" sections).

III. Exploring the Text

This class began its critical exploration of Percy's 1607 journal entry by reading the text silently and then becoming immersed in the exact words on the page. I began this process by saying, "We are all going to share noticings—so please have a noticing to share. Remember that a noticing is something that you can point to on the page and that we can all also look at and say, 'Oh yes, I see that, too.' So, it is not a question, it is not something that is puzzling, just something you look at and can say, 'I see this.'" Here are some of the things the students noticed:

Oliver: If you go over [in the text], it says, "Our men were destroyed with cruell diseases, as Swellings, Flixes, Burning Fevers, and by warres, and some departed suddenly but for the most part, they died of meere... fa- famine...famine."

In Practice: Origins. *In critical exploration, learners are put in situations where they look closely at things or events—lists from long ago, drops of condensation forming in a terrarium, a passage from a novel—in order to make sense of out of them.¹⁶ The term “critical exploration” describes a method of clinical interviewing used by Jean Piaget to learn about a child’s understanding; Barbel Inhelder, a colleague of Piaget’s, coined the term.¹⁷ Later, Eleanor Duckworth (a student and then translator of Piaget’s) began to notice that when she used this method of closely looking at a child’s thinking, she not only learned about what that child was thinking, but that the child learned about whatever it was the child was closely looking at. Duckworth realized that when she intentionally chose an object or situation for the child to study and then closely followed the child’s thinking by listening and asking questions and pointing out counterexamples, the child learned about it. Critical exploration, she began understanding, was not only a research method, but a teaching method as well.*

Maggie: It’s, like, on the fourth paragraph, and it starts with, “Our food was but a small...”

Sandra: In the first paragraph, it says “The fifteenth day,” then somebody died, then it says “The sixteenth day,” and somebody died...

After hearing one or two noticings from each table group, I moved the class into sharing things they found puzzling. After several students shared the puzzle of how many people had died, Bailey wondered about this sentence: “*Our men were destroyed with cruell diseases, as Swellings, Flixes, Burning Fevers, and by warres...*” Here is how that conversation went:

Teacher: Could we hear some other puzzles, because there were some other people with puzzles. Puzzles that might be different from the number of people that died.

Bailey: What was the disease?

Teacher: What was the disease? Tell us where you are talking about.

Bailey: Where it says people died of fevers and stuff.

Teacher: Would you show us where that is?

Bailey: It says, “Swellings, Flixes, Burning Fevers, and by warres.” I think the fourth paragraph, three lines down.

Teacher: Would you go ahead and read that part?

Bailey: “Our men were destroyed with cruell diseases, as Swellings, Flixes, Burning Fevers, and by warres.”

Teacher: And tell us again what you were wondering about?

Bailey: What diseases?

In Practice: Beginnings. *It is important to note that we started not by sharing ideas of what the text meant, but by spending time looking at the exact words on the page. All students are able to point to some text on a page, and so all students can have something to contribute in a critical exploration from the start.*

A few students responded with their own ideas to his question of “what diseases,” and two camps of thought emerged: the first was that “Swellings, Flixes, Burning Fevers” were the names of the diseases, and the second was that those were just the symptoms of the diseases rather than the names. Oliver was in the first camp:

Oliver: Have we done the answer to Bailey’s question?

Teacher: We’ve been talking about it.

Oliver: Well, I think, that “Our men were destroyed with cruell diseases” and that “as Swellings,” like, that “as” part, like, [pause] “Swelling, Flixes, Burning Fevers, and warres,” like, those four are, like, I’m not sure how to explain this. **They’re, like, they’re meanings of what the disease is** [my emphasis added]. Like, I’m saying, “Our men were destroyed with diseases AS” [said with emphasis, then a pause] **like** swellings.

Were “Swellings, Flixes, Burning Fevers” examples of the symptoms which “destroyed” the men or the names of these “cruell diseases”? “Swellings” and “Burning Fevers” do not sound like diseases to the modern ear, but George Percy’s sentence seems to suggest that they were thought of as disease in 1607. It is a subtle difference, one that might depend on which part of the sentence George Percy wanted the “as” to connect to. While an exact meaning may seem obvious or inconsequential to a skilled adult reader, it had puzzled Bailey and engaged Oliver. This resulting puzzlement and engagement are the reasons that student questions are given center stage in critical exploration. Questions that I (or a teacher’s guide) might have come up with would probably not have been nearly as interesting to these students and so would probably not have pushed them along so well to uncover the facts to be found and made sense of.

IV. Inferring Meaning

More specifically, Oliver had been pushed by his classmate’s question to articulate how he thought the “as” affected the relationships of the words that fell around it (“*Our men were destroyed with cruell diseases, as Swellings, Flixes, Burning Fevers...*”). He seemed to conclude that the “as” connected the list to “cruell diseases” (the names of the diseases)

In Practice: Student Questions. *Importantly, I directed Bailey to bring both his question and the exact text it came from into the class discussion. Limiting the class conversation to student-generated questions can help learners dig deeper into the meaning of that text.¹⁸ Also, limiting the conversation to the exact text the questions came from is a helpful way to keep limited time focused on the subject matter in front of us.*

rather than to how they were “destroyed” (the symptoms of the diseases). Because some of the words were new to him and others were being used in unfamiliar ways, Oliver was not able to understand the literal meaning of this sentence through recall alone. Rather, he inferred the literal meaning by combining his idea of one of the meanings of the word “as” with the words around it. In more general terms, he made an inference by using what was known (the meaning of “as” and the individual words around it) to figure out what was unknown (the literal meaning of the words put together).

Making inferences, however, is often only thought of as “reading between the lines,” that is, of comprehending something that goes beyond the literal meaning of a text. A reader might, for example, infer that a character who is described as “running away” feels scared of whatever he or she is running away from. Even if the character’s emotions are not mentioned in the text, it may be a reasonable conclusion based on evidence in the text, and so would be a good inference. This kind of inference has been called an elaborative inference.¹⁹ As the name suggests, making elaborative inferences helps readers comprehend meaning that goes beyond what is written on a page; it helps them elaborate on the text.

Instead of going beyond the literal meaning of the text, though, Oliver *made his inference in order to comprehend the literal meaning itself*. A useful name for this kind of inference comes from the linguistics literature: explanatory inference. An explanatory inference can be thought of as how a person makes sense of ambiguous or vague language.²⁰ To make an explanatory inference, a reader would make sense of an unfamiliar word or phrase by connecting it to something he or she already knows. An example of this is when readers use familiar context clues to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words. In Oliver’s case, he was making sense of how two familiar words in the text (“diseases” and “swellings”) fit together when connected by an unfamiliar use of the word “as.” He seemed to reason that, since “as” and “like” can be used similarly (“*as* I was saying...” and “*like* I was saying...”), one could perhaps be substituted for the other. By doing this, he came to a conclusion about the literal meaning of this text “on the basis of evidence and reasoning” and so made an explanatory inference.

In Practice: Teacher Responsibilities. *Instead of first reading about what historians (or scientists or mathematicians or teachers) might think about a topic, students engaged in critical exploration first look at teacher-chosen things that these experts might also have looked at.*

Some teacher responsibilities are:

- *to choose a thing (document, artifact, phenomenon) that holds and reveals enough complexity about a topic to make it worth figuring out for students;*
- *to have a good understanding of the learning terrain found in this thing (especially this terrain’s boundaries—a sense of the learning that this thing will and will not support) and of what paths students could possibly follow through it; and*
- *to guide students through the close examination of this thing by finding out what they notice in it (descriptions), what they wonder about it (questions), and what they make of the things they have noticed and wondered (ideas, theories, predictions).*

This approach to studying subject matter acknowledges the complexity that underlies even the simplest of facts (such as “A lot of people died of disease in early Jamestown”), and it provides multiple entry points and multiple paths for students to follow as they grapple with this complexity.

V. Mediating Idea

As a model of what happens in a reader’s mind to make an inference, Singer, et al. suggest the syllogism.²¹ Syllogisms are those logical sequences in which if general premise “A” is true, and specific premise “B” is also true, then it must be that conclusion “C” is true as well. (Perhaps the best known syllogism is: “All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal.”) Though the logic of this equation when applied to inferences must be relaxed to include “what might be” instead of only “what must be,” it nonetheless provides some insight.

So, the syllogism for the elaborative inference of “the character is running away because he was scared” might look like this:

Elaborative Inference

General premise (found in reader’s background knowledge): *People run away from things they are scared of.*

Plus

Specific premise (found in the text): *The protagonist is running away from the antagonist.*

Suggests

Conclusion (the inference): *Perhaps the protagonist is scared of the antagonist.*

In Practice: Varied Reading Ability. Part of the benefit of doing a critical exploration of a text like Percy's with an entire class is that all readers—regardless of level—are pushed to be explicit about these explanatory inferences. In reading kinds of texts that are more familiar to students, stronger readers may be off and running with elaborative inferences while weaker readers are still putting together the literal pieces with explanatory inferences. A text like this is unfamiliar enough to raise the need for all readers to slow down and pay close attention to their own thinking about how they are making sense of the text.

In this example, the reader gains an understanding of the character's "running away" by connecting general background knowledge to the specific text. So, making an inference in reading can be thought of as a reader coming to a conclusion by adding a more general idea to a more specific text.

In Oliver's case, it seems that his explanatory inference could be modeled like this:

Oliver's Reading Comprehension

General premise (Oliver's background knowledge): "As" could mean that an example of a preceding word comes next in the text ("as = like").

Plus

Specific premise (the text): "Our men were destroyed with cruel diseases, as Swellings, Flixes, Burning Fevers..."

Suggests

Conclusion (Oliver's inference): Perhaps the author means that "Swellings," etc. are names of the diseases.

Oliver's idea of "as = like" helped him infer (and comprehend) that even though "Swellings and Flixes..." might not sound to him like examples of diseases, Percy's choice of the word "as" suggested that he meant just that.

In a later work, Singer labels the reader's idea that forms the general premise as a "mediating idea" because "The missing premise 'mediates' the explicit ideas" of the specific premise and the conclusion.²² That is, it "forms a connecting link" or even "intervenes...in a dispute in order to bring about an agreement or reconciliation."²³ In Oliver's case, the "explicit ideas" are both the text and his conclusion about what it means, which were "mediated" by his general premise. Oliver's "as = like" is a mediating idea because it "form[ed] a connecting link" in his mind between the text and a conclusion about Percy's intended meaning of the

In Practice: Sharing Background Information. Like reading teachers, history teachers also grapple with the issue of background knowledge as they think about how to teach a particular topic or idea. However, conceiving of “background knowledge” as “prior knowledge” seems to be unnecessarily limiting when making teaching decisions. Since the term “prior knowledge” suggests that one thing must be known before another thing can be understood, it would seem logical that the one thing must be taught before the other thing. Learning, however, is rarely so linear. Sense making is often as much about looking back and reflecting on past experiences as it is about moving forward into new experiences. So, background knowledge can be introduced at any time with the intention of deepening an existing student understanding or question. While it may be true, as Barton suggests, that “students’ ability to make sense of primary sources depends directly on their understanding of the contexts in which the documents were produced,”²⁴ this does not mean that the historical context must be taught before a primary source is introduced. In addition, by first giving students the opportunity to develop their own questions and ideas about a primary source, a teacher gives himself or herself the opportunity to figure out what the most helpful background information might be to help students learn from their interests and questions. In this case, the journal entry being studied was introduced with little more than, “these are a group people who had sailed to North America from England and are beginning a settlement in 1607.” After students had worked with this journal entry, background information was shared through a fabulous National Geographic website²⁵ and a read-aloud of the historical fiction book *Blood on the River*.

text. In other words, his mediating idea helped him make sense of the literal meaning of these words.

Further, mediating ideas seem to be an important element for creating historical understanding from reading comprehension. Reading teachers have long known that without relevant and accurate background knowledge, readers struggle with comprehension.²⁶ It would seem, then, that when reading a primary source text from a time period about which students do not yet have much background knowledge, this struggle might be insurmountable and unproductive.²⁷

However, a reason that students can usually find their way through this puzzle could be that the inferences that make for good reading comprehension *support* the inferences that make for good historical understanding. This is illustrated below as the conversation about “swellings and stuff” continued:

Maggie: What I think Oliver is trying to say is, like, um, that, like, the swellings and stuff, maybe that was part of the disease, like, they kind of got the disease, except it got more complex.

Teacher: Oh.

Oliver: Yeah, kind of like that.

Teacher [*to a raised hand*]: Go ahead.

Jackson: Well, I partially agree with Maggie, because I think that these diseases that they're getting are, um, they probably will get worse, but, umm, I think these are the disease they are having right now, like, like right now we call burning fever not, like, a disease.

Oliver: Burning fever is just, like, your forehead is burning hot.

Jackson: I think that way back in 1607, they could have called these diseases, so I think that [...*inaudible*...] swelling are the diseases, but they don't have medicine.

Teacher: And is that similar to what Oliver was saying?

Jackson: Yes.

Teacher: So, you're saying these things are the diseases?

Jackson: Yes.

So, it seems that there could be closely related syllogisms for Oliver's reading comprehension and the collective historical understanding that was emerging from this conversation, represented by Jackson's comments. Notice how Oliver's conclusion (inference) seems to become Jackson's specific premise:

Oliver's Reading Comprehension
(explanatory inference)

General premise (*Oliver's mediating idea*): "As" can mean that examples follow—"as = like".

Plus

Specific premise (*text*): "Our men were destroyed with cruell diseases, as Swellings, Flixes, Burning Fevers..."

Suggests

Conclusion (*Oliver's new inference*): **Perhaps Percy meant that "Swellings," etc., were examples of diseases.**

Jackson's New Historical Understanding
(elaborative inference that builds on Oliver's explanatory inference)

General premise (*Jackson's mediating idea*): Swellings are symptoms, not diseases.

Plus

In Practice: Explicit Teaching. *I am not shy about saying things like, “What you just did is something that historians do all the time, they...,” and then I say in general terms what they just did, like corroborating or contextualizing. I want students to be very aware that they are engaged in the practice of historical inquiry and there are tools that are helpful for doing this well. Importantly, I usually wait to do this kind of explicit teaching until I see a student already doing it or until I am convinced that a particular skill or heuristic will feel useful to students. If I introduce it before they experience the need for it, its usefulness will be less apparent to them and my job of teaching it will be more difficult.*

Specific premise (*Oliver’s prior inference about the meaning of the text*): ***Percy meant that “Swellings,” etc. were examples of diseases.***

Suggests

Conclusion (*Jackson’s new inference*): ***Perhaps people had different understandings of what diseases were in 1607.***

So, Oliver first inferred that even though “Swellings...Burning Fevers” might sound more like symptoms to him, Percy thought of them as diseases. With Oliver’s conclusion of the literal meaning firmly in place (for Oliver, Jackson, and probably other members of the group), it seems that Jackson then used it as a new specific premise. By combining this with his mediating idea that swellings are actually symptoms, Jackson made an elaborative inference: that people had a different understanding of disease in 1607. Students in this conversation were, in essence, creating new historical ideas by making explanatory and elaborative inferences about this text.

Another elaborative inference—and new piece of historical understanding—emerged as this conversation continued:

Brent: I partially agree with Jackson, I think that idea, I think that’s right. I also agree with myself.

Teacher: And what does that mean, you agree with yourself?

Brent: Umm, that those aren’t really [...*inaudible*...] I think half and half, like, I think those are the symptoms, but I think those are the names, but I think they got the names ’cause of the symptoms. But I don’t think they’ve really named them yet, but they got the names from the symptoms.

Brent was grappling with the implications of this sentence by making an elaborative inference: “I think they got the names ’cause of the symptoms.” Like Jackson, he seemed to use another student’s conclusion as a stepping-stone for thinking beyond the text. His thought process of “partially agreeing with Jackson” could be modeled like this:

In Practice: Monitoring for Comprehension. Laura Pardo notes that, when reading to themselves, “Readers have been found to both over- and underestimate their comprehension of text.”²⁸ So, a strength of this type of group conversation is that readers have the opportunity to monitor each other’s comprehension instead of just relying on self-monitoring. Similarly, Anderson et al. suggest that an internal product of this sort of external discussion is the development of the ability to see different viewpoints on a topic: “thinkers must hear several voices within their own heads representing different perspectives on the issue. The ability and disposition to take more than one perspective arise from participating in discussions with others who hold different perspectives.”²⁹ Brent’s comment, “I partially agree with Jackson...I also partly agree with myself,” is a good example of this.

Brent’s New Historical Understanding

(elaborative inference that builds on Jackson’s elaborative inference)

General Premise (Brent’s mediating idea/background knowledge):
 “Swellings,” etc., are symptoms, not diseases.

Plus

Specific Premise (Jackson’s idea): People had different understandings of what diseases were in 1607.

Suggests

Conclusion (Brent’s inference): “I think they got the names ‘cause of the symptoms.”

So, these elaborative inferences about how people might have thought about disease in 1607 resulted from another student’s initial explanatory inference about the literal meaning of the text. This brief conversation (it lasted just a few minutes), with students building on one another’s ideas, is a snapshot of good readers being good historians. Through making sense of this text, they were coming to know what Master Percy might have believed and understood about his world at the moment he wrote this journal entry in 1607.

That is quite a different teaching approach from presenting students with “the facts” of history. Telling students that “over a dozen people died in Jamestown between August 15 and September 4, 1607” is true, but hardly intriguing or memorable. In just presenting “the facts,” it is as if teachers or textbook authors preassemble the tiny pieces of this historical puzzle and then re-cut them into smooth circles for students, leaving the jigs and jags behind.³⁰ The newly rounded piece of “over a dozen people died” contains a completed picture of this solitary fact, not requiring students to find any nubs and nooks of other pieces in their minds (i.e., mediating

In Practice: Informational Texts. *In all of this, there is still an important place for the informational texts and secondary sources that should fill a classroom’s bookshelves. I think it comes after students have had a full opportunity to form their own ideas about the things studied. Before a class consults an informational text or secondary source, a teacher might tell his or her students that the experts who came up with the ideas in it were probably looking at some of the same primary sources that the students had just become familiar with. So, instead of providing “the answer” or “the way it really was,” it becomes someone else’s attempt at making sense of a familiar primary source. One helpful ingredient for making this work productively is to use texts that are good about ascribing ideas to particular individuals or ones that are written by named people who are taking a clear and reasoned position on a topic. It is harder for students to argue with the nameless “omniscient” narrator of many informational texts than with a specific person who championed an idea.³¹ In this way, students can experience what it means to think critically about the origins of historical knowledge.*

ideas) or in the texts being studied. And if it is true that we make sense of new things by fitting them together with what we already know,³² then the ability of these facts to stand on their own is their greatest weakness. Being told “the facts” leaves students with little more to do than just sit and listen—no asking or seeking required.

Good readers make good historians because making inferences about texts not only binds word to word for a comprehensible text, but also binds fact to fact for a comprehensible history. But if teachers make facts seem able to stand on their own (“diseases” without “Swellings,” Jamestown without Percy, etc.), simple recall may work well enough for students and there becomes little need for them to reason. Recall without reason (i.e., conclusions without mediating ideas) means that students do not understand much more than they already did about something. There is little they are able to explain or elaborate on because their teachers have not put them into situations where they are confronted by the need for historical thinking.

VI. Conclusion

With this idea of inference-making as “connecting the known to the unknown through mediating ideas” in mind, let’s rewind to the first part of this class conversation, to the name-counting that led up to Brent’s plea to “just settle it on ‘a lot of people died’”:

Teacher: What did you notice, Brent?

In Practice: What Students Bring, What Teachers Do. *As this class conversation illustrates, critical exploration is a method of teaching where students do most of the “telling” and teachers do most of the “listening.”³³ As the teacher, my responsibility was to make sure that these students brought some necessary elements into our class conversation.*

1. First, I made sure that students brought what they saw in the text. After starting by asking them to be ready to share one thing they noticed in the text, I reminded them, “Remember that a noticing is something that you can point to on the page and that we can all also look at and say, ‘Oh yes, I see that, too.’” Some examples of noticings from this text might be: “In the third paragraph, first line, I noticed the words ‘four and twentieth,’” or “On the first line of the second paragraph, I noticed that the word ‘captain’ is spelled C-a-p-t-a-i-n-e.” I wanted first to ground our conversation in the exact words on the page before opening the conversation to my students’ thoughts about those words. Also, students identified the exact location in the text so that we all could look and see what they saw. Having students number the lines can be helpful, too.

2. Next, I gave them the opportunity to bring into our class conversation their specific questions and puzzles about the text. I tried to hear all of the questions and puzzles before anyone responded to them. That way, I could hear the range and commonalities of questions before I chose the ones for our discussion that I thought would be most productive to spend our limited class time focusing on. It is important to choose the fruitful questions, and this is difficult if a teacher is not familiar with the learning territory a text covers.

3. Finally, I invited students to bring their own ideas about these questions and puzzles that our class had raised. Since THEY are the learners, it is THEIR thinking (and not mine) that must fill our conversation. If I have chosen the subject matter well, then students will easily enter the territory I would like

(continued on page 247)

Brent: Well, it’s kind of on the whole page. A lot of people died. A lot of death.

Oliver: A lot! [*said emphatically*]

Teacher: And at this table group? Sandra?

Sandra: In the first paragraph, it says, “The fifteenth day,” then somebody died, then it says, “The sixteenth day,” and somebody died...

After Robert shared that “fifteen important people died” on the whole page, Chris shared that he thought only fourteen people died. He suggested that maybe Robert had counted the same person twice, that “there died Captaine Bartholomew Gosnold” referred to the same event as “After Captaine Gosnolds death.”

them to explore. While I am directing students toward WHAT TO THINK ABOUT (what life was like in Jamestown during these three weeks), I am not telling them WHAT TO THINK (“A lot of people died”). Their thoughts are their own, and as I work to understand them, their ideas become clearer not just to me, but to them as well.

This routine is especially fruitful once students are familiar with it. At first, though, they do benefit from explicit instruction about how to go through each step, like when I reminded them what a noticing was. The beauty of establishing a familiar routine like this is that a teacher is then freed up to listen to what students have to say about their own ideas.

It is also important to note what I did NOT do in this class:

- 1. I did not give them (or even hint at) my questions about the text. It is hard for an experienced reader (like me) to know what less-experienced readers (like my students) might find confusing or interesting in a text.*
- 2. I did not tell my students what I thought the answers to their questions were. Answering student questions can be a hard habit to break, but if the pattern of the conversation is “student questions—teacher answers” (or worse: “teacher questions—teacher answers”), little room is left for students to think about their questions and to learn. A good antidote to answering questions is responding with something like, “Does anyone have something to say about Oliver’s question?” or, “Can we leave that question open, and hear what people have to say about it later?”*
- 3. I did not let the conversation stray from the text in front of us or from other texts we had already studied. Especially with such limited time, I am always quick to ask students to point out what in the text makes them think or wonder something. If a comment is not coming directly from a text, I might say something like, “That’s an interesting question/idea, but we need to keep our conversation based on the words in this journal entry.”*

After a few other student comments like, “someone died every day,” Calvin said, “I counted again and it was eighteen.” His disagreement with Robert and Chris agitated a handful of students into once again recounting the names. Soon, the name counting group came up with final tallies. The range was from fifteen to twenty-two, with several students claiming eighteen. Their conversation then took center stage:

Irene: I think I know why some people are getting things wrong, well, because there’s Captain Kendall, but it doesn’t say he died, and there’s, like, Thomas Stoodie, and then it says “Cape Merchant,” and...

Calvin: No, “merchant” is like a...

In Practice: Standards and Pushing Students Along. *Teaching with critical exploration contrasts sharply with the kind of teaching that pulls students along towards an idea that a teacher already has about a text. It would be a difficult task for teachers to unravel all the ideas that come to mind as they read a text like this and then to anticipate which of those ideas would be just right for their students. While I certainly had a teaching agenda that was based on the complex mix of my interests, my school district's curriculum, and my state's standards, my agenda then resided in the text and in the questions and ideas it spurred in students. I might try to bring out different awarenesses of the text by asking students to do different things with it (maybe to write or draw or graphically organize something from it), but the ideas that enter our exploration and conversation are theirs and not mine. Their ideas come from what they see in the text, not from what I communicate about the text. So, instead of pulling this group along toward an idea I had chosen, I taught this class by pushing students along to make their own sense out of their own questions of what this carefully chosen text holds and reveals. And it seems to me that this kind of pushing usually happens from behind, from closely following what students see, wonder, and think about as they engage with the text in front of them and with peers around them.*

Irene: Yeah, I don't think "merchant" is another person...

Brent: Well, if you take "Cape Merchant" off of mine, I only have fifteen.

Maggie: It says two things about Captaine Gosnold's death...its not two people!

Teacher: Hmmm...are folks still counting?

Brent: I got sixteen and if Cape Merchant isn't one, then I have fifteen.

At this point, the name counters all began heatedly talking at once, and out of this confusion of numbers and names came Brent's plea: "Can we just settle it on 'a lot of people died?'" And having traveled all that distance through the text and through their thoughts about the text, I think they could. They could say "a lot of people died" and feel some of the texture in that fact: that during the first feeble months of the Jamestown settlement, people died at an alarming rate. The awareness of this had deepened with each recounting and each exchange.

Lots of people died during the European colonization of North America. Simply telling students this fact does little to teach it because learning depends more on what teachers have students do than on what teachers alone do or say. By asking readers to notice, puzzle, and reason their way through carefully chosen texts and artifacts, teachers not only end up teaching "the facts" of history³⁴ but also help their students engage in

historical thinking through having them do this “textured analysis of the relations among . . . facts”³⁵—through having them *do* history.

What we have our students doing in this kind of teaching— noticing, asking, seeking, suggesting, articulating, theorizing—can make them not only into good readers or good historians, but also into good students, good learners. Helping students build their own ideas to connect what they already know to what we want and hope for them to learn could even, it seems, be the central challenge of teaching itself, whether it is teaching reading, history, or anything at all.

Notes:

I would like to thank my colleagues and friends who provided such helpful feedback on various drafts of this paper: Eleanor Duckworth, Alythea McKinney, Lisa Schneier, Ann Semonite, Kellie Smith, David Galin, and Amy Kustra Barksdale. Also, I’d like to thank Editor Jane Dabel, the Editorial Board, and the anonymous referees at *The History Teacher* for their feedback, patience, and for pushing me to see more in this work. Correspondence may be sent to sbarksdale@criticalexplorers.org.

1. Elizabeth A. City, Richard F. Elmore, Sarah E. Fiarman, and Lee Teitel, *Instructional Rounds in Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009). These authors boil this idea down to “task predicts performance” (p. 30).
2. Samuel Wineburg, “On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach Between School and Academy,” *American Educational Research Journal* 28, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 515.
3. Keith C. Barton, “Breaking through the Myths,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 86, no. 10 (June 2005): 749.
4. Eleanor Duckworth, “Helping Students Get to Where Ideas Can Find Them,” *The New Educator* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 2009): 185-188.
5. Jeffery D. Nokes, “Recognizing and Addressing the Barriers to Adolescents’ ‘Reading Like Historians,’” *The History Teacher* 44, no. 3 (May 2011): 379-404.
6. Joan W. Musbach, “Using Primary Sources in the Secondary Classroom,” *OAH Magazine of History* 16, no. 1 (Fall 2001): 30-32.
7. Erin McKean, ed., *New Oxford American Dictionary*, second ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), retrieved from CD-ROM.
8. Anne Kispal, “Effective Teaching of Inference Skills for Reading: Literature Review: Research Report DCSF-RR031,” National Foundation for Educational Research, 2008, ERIC (ED501868).
9. Kathryn T. Spoehr and Luther W. Spoehr, “Learning to Think Historically,” *Educational Psychologist* 29, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 71.
10. All student names are pseudonyms.
11. George Percy, “Observations by Master George Percy, 1607,” in *Narratives of Early Virginia, 1606-1625*, ed. Lyon Gardiner Tyler (New York: Charles Scribner’s

Sons, 1907), 21-22, online facsimile edition at <<http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/aj&CISOPTR=4809>>.

12. Spoehr and Spoehr, 74.

13. One of the many puzzling things about this English map (“The Hunt Map”) for students is the presence of a Spanish phrase (“Archivo general de Simancas—Secretaria de Estado—Legajo 2586 [...]”) written outside the border of the map. The General Archive of Simancas was begun in 1475 and continued until 1834 as an archive of the documents for the Spanish monarchy. This is one of the parts of the map that opens an opportunity for students to think about the European context of the time.

14. These include a fabulous map/plan of their fort (“The Hunt Map,” from <<http://www.mainmemory.net>>); an artist’s rendition of what that fort might have actually looked like (from <<http://www.archaeologychannel.org/popham.html>>); excerpts of Journal entries written by Captain Robert Davies, who captained the ship that transported the colonists (from <<http://content.wisconsinhistory.org>>); and video commentary around the archeological record found at the fort’s site (also from <<http://www.archaeologychannel.org/popham.html>>).

15. Duckworth, 257-272.

16. Eleanor Duckworth, “Critical Exploration in the Classroom,” *The New Educator* 1, no. 4 (October 2005): 257-272, doi: 10.1080/15476880500276728.

17. Inhelder, Sinclair, and Bovet, as cited in Eleanor Duckworth, “Critical Exploration in the Classroom,” *The New Educator* 1, no. 4 (October 2005): 257-272, doi: 10.1080/15476880500276728.

18. Ana Taboada and John T. Guthrie, “Contributions of Student Questioning and Prior Knowledge to Construction of Knowledge from Reading Information Text,” *Journal of Literacy Research* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 1-35.

19. Arthur C. Graesser, Murray Singer, and Tom Trabasso, “Constructing Inferences During Narrative Text Comprehension,” *Psychological Review* 101, no. 3 (July 1994): 371-395. Kate Cain, Jill V. Oakhill, Marcia A. Barnes, and Peter E. Bryant, “Comprehension Skill, Inference-Making Ability, and Their Relation to Knowledge,” *Memory & Cognition* 29, no. 6 (September 2001): 850-859.

20. Lawrence Birnbaum, “Inferential Memory and Linguistic Creativity,” *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 5, no. 3 (1990): 175-193.

21. Murray Singer, Michael Halldorson, Jeffery C. Lear, and Peter Andrusiak, “Validation of Causal Bridging Inferences in Discourse Understanding,” *Journal of Memory and Language* 31, no. 4 (August 1992): 507-524, doi:10.1016/0749-596X(92)90026-T.

22. Murray Singer, “Causal Validation and Causal Comprehension,” in *Sources of Coherence in Reading*, ed. Robert F. Lorch and Edward J. O’Brien (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1995), 241-262; Singer, 242.

23. McKean.

24. Barton, 749.

25. National Geographic, “America in 1607: Jamestown and the Powhatan,” <<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2007/05/jamestown/jamestown-standalone>>.

26. Richard C. Anderson and P. David Pearson, “A Schema-Theoretic View of Basic Processes in Reading Comprehension,” in *Handbook of Reading Research*, ed. P. David Pearson (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1984/2002), 255-292.

27. Barton goes so far as to assert that “Without prior knowledge [of the historical context], sources are literally incomprehensible, and it is impossible to construct meaning from them.” (p. 750) The student learning recounted here suggests something different: that students can draw on a range of what they already know (and not just context specific knowledge) to begin making valid sense of primary source documents.

28. Laura S. Pardo, "What Every Teacher Needs to Know About Comprehension," *The Reading Teacher* 58, no. 3 (November 2004): 277, doi:10.1598/RT.58.3.5.
29. Anderson and Pearson, 255-292.
30. Lisa Schneier is probably the source of this metaphor. She writes, "[W]e organize subject matter into a neat series of steps which assumes a profound uniformity among students. We sand away at the interesting edges of subject matter until it is so free from its natural complexities, so neat, that there is not a crevice left as an opening. All that is left is to hand it to them, scrubbed and smooth, so that they can view it as outsiders." (p. 128) as cited in: Eleanor Duckworth, *The Having of Wonderful Ideas* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).
31. Alythea McKinney, e-mail and phone conversation, 31 October 2011.
32. Jean Piaget and Barbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).
33. Eleanor Duckworth, *Tell Me More: Listening to Learners Explain* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).
34. A neat portrait of a teacher using critical exploration in a different context—teaching poetry to high school students—can be found in Lisa Schneier, "Apprehending Poetry," in Eleanor Duckworth, *Tell Me More: Listening to Learners Explain* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).
35. Spoehr and Spoehr, 74.

Appendix

**Excerpt from
“Observations by Master George Percy, 1607”
(p. 21, 22)**

The fifteenth day [of August, 1607], their died Edward Browne and Stephen Galthorpe. The sixteenth day, their died Thomas Gower Gentleman. The seventeenth day, their died Thomas Mounslic. The eighteenth day, there died Robert Pennington, and John Martine Gentleman. The nineteenth day, died Drue Piggase Gentleman. The two and twentieth day of August, there died Captaine Bartholomew Gosnold, one of our Councell [...]

After Captaine Gosnols death, the Councell could hardly agree by the dissention of Captaine Kendall [...]

The foure and twentieth day, died Edward Harington and George Walker, and were buried the same day. The six and twentieth day, died Kenelme Throgmortine. The seven and twentieth day died William Roods. The eight and twentieth day died Thomas Stoodie, Cape Merchant.

The fourth day of September died Thomas Jacob Sergeant. The fift day, there died Benjamin Beast. Our men were destroyed with cruell diseases, as Swellings, Flixes, Burning Fevers, and by warres, and some departed suddenly, but for the most part they died of meere famine. There were never Englishmen left in a forreigne Countrey in such miserie as wee were in this new discovered Virginia. [...] Our food was but a small Can of Barlie sod in water, to five men a day, our drinke cold water taken out of the River, which was at a floud verie salt, at a low tide full of slime and filth, which was the destruction of many of our men. Thus we lived for the space of five moneths in this miserable distresse, not having five able men to man our Bulwarkes upon any occasion. [...]